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# André Bazin's Ontology of Photographic and Film Imagery

I

First and foremost a film critic and champion of cinematic realism, André Bazin is generally recognized as one of the most important figures in the history of film aesthetics and his writings on film are universally acknowledged to have influenced a generation of filmmakers, critics, and theorists. Indeed, Bazin is just one of a small number of important theorists from the past who, although their influence has not entirely waned, have already been sufficiently superseded by new methods and approaches that they have come to be referred to as "classical" film theorists. Yet his status as a theorist of the still photograph is vastly different. The short article upon which this reputation is based continues to inspire some of the most influential work in the aesthetics of photography, and constitutes the starting point for much modern photographic theory. Stanley Cavell, Rudolf Arnheim, Susan Sontag, Kendall Walton, Patrick Maynard, Roland Barthes, Ted Cohen, and Roger Scruton are just a few who, in their writings on photography, have echoed to a greater or lesser degree themes more or less explicitly Bazinian in sympathy and outlook.[1] Each of these writers reach quite different conclusions about photography and each, together with the entire Bazinian conception of photography, have been brought under extensive critical scrutiny. What has rarely been given the attention it deserves is Bazin's actual argument in his seminal 1945 essay entitled "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (hereafter OPI).[2] Gregory Currie and Noël Carroll are two notable exceptions, but both misinterpret Bazin on the way to dismissing his position.[3]

I will return shortly to the interpretations of Bazin's thought presented by these two critics, but it will be helpful if we begin by considering the intellectual and methodological context in which the argument of OPI is framed. The source of much misunderstanding of Bazin's argument is the failure to take notice of both the explicitly stated perspective from which he approaches his explanation of the distinctive nature of photographic representation, and the implicit methodological assumptions of his argument. Throughout OPI, Bazin repeatedly indicates that he is considering photography from a psychological perspective. As we will see, this means two things: first, he is concerned with the impact that the particular process by which photographs are made has on beliefs and attitudes regarding photographic representation. This is a first-order psychological account of the significance of photography in terms of human responsiveness to the kind of material sign a photograph is. Second, his perspective on photography is psychological in the second-order sense of positing an underlying human need that is in part responsible for the first-order psychological responsiveness to photography.

Failure to take notice of the implicit methodological assumptions of Bazin's argument has been the source of critical misunderstanding. When Bazin announces in his title that his concern is with the ontology of the photographic image, we rightly take him to mean that he is concerned with the nature, or being, or distinctive identity of the photograph. Bazin's intellectual orientation with regard to ontology is not, however, that of a philosopher in the analytic tradition who might, for example, appeal to

identity conditions as the basis of determinations of an object's nature. For Bazin, ontology is a topic addressed phenomenologically, and it is a reasonable assumption that his phenomenological method bears some relation to that detailed by Jean Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. It is known, for example, that Bazin very carefully read Sartre's earlier *Psychology of the Imagination* and was deeply influenced by the connection indicated there, and later developed in *Being and Nothingness*, between art and ontology.[4] We do not need to suppose that Bazin accepted and employed Sartre's phenomenological ontology in all of its detail and dimensions, but the announced concern of OPI with ontology and the thrust of his argument indicate the influence of an at least broadly Sartrean phenomenological method.

The simplest characterization of phenomenological ontology sees this method as the attempt to grasp and understand the contents of the world through an investigation of the way they present themselves to consciousness. To discover what a thing is, to grasp its being, is to give a lucid description of its appearance to consciousness. These appearances of things to consciousness reveal both what is and the intentional nature of what is. To explore the ontology of the photographic image is therefore to explore how photographs present themselves to consciousness, and to reveal their nature by careful description of what they are for us in experience. It is tempting to say that the implicit assumption of this method of ontological investigation adds a third psychological dimension to Bazin's investigation of photography. Consider, for example, the following gloss on Sartre's ontology by Hazel Barnes, distinguishing it from the ontological assumptions of Berkeleian idealism and Cartesian realism: "Consciousness does not create material being, and it is not—as consciousness—determined by it. But in revealing being, consciousness introduces differentiation, and signification. Consciousness bestows meaning on being."[5] Differentiation, significance, and meaning—the phenomenological nature and identity of a material object—is bestowed or projected onto material being, and this is a psychological explanation in the broadest sense of the term. Failure to take notice of the broadly psychological orientation of Bazin's theory of photographic representation leads some of his interpreters into misunderstanding what he is in fact defending. This will become apparent when we turn to the interpretations offered by Currie and Carroll of Bazin's position.

## II

Bazin devotes the first half of the essay to an account of the evolution of the plastic arts through the invention of photography. It is in this part of his argument that Bazin introduces and explores the second-order psychological need that plays such an important role in his account of photographic representation in the second half of OPI. In Bazin's account of the evolution of the plastic arts, this need is identified as the driving force behind their genesis and development. This is signaled at the outset of OPI when he writes:

> If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their genesis . . . The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed entirely against death, saw survival as depending on the continued existence of the material body. By providing a defence against the passage of time it satisfied a fundamental psychological need in mankind: a defence against time, for death is but the victory of time. To artificially preserve bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time . . . The first Egyptian statute, then, was a mummy.[6]

The fundamental need that gives birth to the plastic arts is that of cheating death and securing a continued spiritual existence, and it is originally answered by the embalming of the corpse to preserve it against the effects of time. Soon, however, the Egyptians realized that all their preservation techniques provided insufficient security against the eventual destruction of the body. However, the continued need to defeat time led them to place statues of the deceased in the tomb to serve as substitute bodies for those souls whose embalmed body is destroyed. Bazin comments on this story of the birth of the plastic arts in a struggle against death: "Thus is revealed, in the origins of sculpture its primordial function: to preserve being by means of its representation."[7] Many of the elements of this account of the origin of the

plastic arts in "magic identity-substitutes" are not original to Bazin. We need not trace their origin to all the influences on Bazin's thought, but the extent to which he is echoing ideas he found in André Malraux's anthropological theory of art history is worth noting.

Bazin was a great admirer of Malraux's writings and at the time he began writing OPI he is reported to have said that he "wanted to do for cinema what Malraux had done for art . . . to show its social function emerging from deep psychological necessities."[8] For Malraux, these necessities underlie art's evolving social function through successive periods of human history, the character of which continually returns in the cyclical unfolding of art history. This dialectic of transformation structuring the history of art and aesthetics is adapted from G. W. F. Hegel's theory of art history, and echoed by Bazin in OPI. Like Malraux, and indeed Hegel, Bazin takes the first of these periods to be the ancient Egyptian, when art's function was that of sacred identity-substitute. This period gives way to that of ancient Greece, which Malraux takes to be the period when art is characterized by the impulse to immortalize, and thus make divine, the contents of the natural world through the representation of their appearance. This in turn gives way to the Hellenistic period, in which art becomes profane, valuing the reproduction of the world's appearance for its own sake.[9] These stages proceed cyclically through history, but the various manifestations of the impulse to defeat time that each one represents remain within the subconscious of mankind and thus continually exercise an influence on the psychology of the arts. As Bazin remarks:

> Civilization cannot . . . entirely cast out the bogey of time. It can only sublimate our concern with it to the level of rational thought. No one believes any longer in the ontological identity of model and image, but all are agreed that the image helps us to remember the subject and to preserve him from a second spiritual death. (OPI, p. 10)

How it manifests itself may change as civilization and the arts evolve, but what remains constant is the deep psychological need to "have the last word in the argument with death by means of the form that endures" (OPI, p. 10). And therefore, Bazin writes: "If the history of the plastic arts is not solely concerned with their aesthetic, but primarily with their psychology, then it is essentially the history of resemblance or, if you want, of realism."[10] To achieve true realism, painters have to combine and balance a concern for the symbolic representation of "spiritual realities" with the pursuit of resemblance, and the greatest artists have always been capable of achieving the right balance. They allot "to each its proper place in the hierarchy of things, holding reality at their command and moulding it at will into the fabric of their art" (OPI, p. 11). But from the moment artificial perspective was rediscovered during the Renaissance, artists began to give greater emphasis to the reproduction of appearance until "bit by bit, it came to dominate the plastic arts" (OPI, p. 12).

For Bazin, like Malraux before him, this consuming interest with appearances represents a fall from the divine character of ancient and late-medieval art into the profane art of the Renaissance, and sowed the seeds for "a great spiritual and technical crisis" in painting (OPI, p. 10). For with the domination of painting by artificial perspective, painting becomes torn between two ambitions: "One, primarily aesthetic, namely the expression of the spiritual realities wherein the world is transcended by a symbolism of form; the other being nothing but the wholly psychological desire to replace the exterior world with its copy."[11] Despite their occasional reconciliation in the greatest art, there is a tension between these two representational ambitions. The search for verisimilitude of appearance depends on an artist employing skills and techniques to fool the eye of the spectator into taking the picture for what it represents. This deception stands uncomfortably with that other aim of realism, which is to reveal the deeper truth behind mere appearance. It is as if, in order to achieve verisimilitude and reveal the world for what it is, the painter must rely on the deception that the picture gives us the world as it appears. Deception, however, is a poor ally to call on if one's task is to represent the real and the true.

Bazin draws on that tradition that sees the conflict between these ends of art being played out in many guises and that came to a head in the mid-nineteenth century with the debate over the value of realism and the entire conception of art as the accurate and true representation of the

natural world. He is also perfectly aware, writing in the dominant modernist atmosphere of his day, that realism was deemed to have lost the argument. Indeed, many of the arguments against photography as an art form still prevalent in Bazin's day were really reworkings of the arguments against realism. These arguments, and indeed the entire debate about the value of realism, are, for Bazin, based on "a confusion between the aesthetic and the psychological." A confusion, that is, "[b]etween true realism, the need, that is, to give significant expression to the world both concretely and its essence, and a pseudo-realism aimed at fooling the eye (or for that matter the mind); a pseudo-realism content in other words with illusory appearances" (OPI, p. 12). Indeed, far from being the *reductio ad absurdum* of realism, photography is the return to true realism, and the liberator of painting from pseudorealism. The obsession with likeness that led painting into pseudorealism, rooted in the psychological need to preserve the world through embodying it in copies, is transferred to the medium of photography. For not only does photography give us true realism, thus restoring that value as a pictorial ideal, it is also the case that "photography and the cinema . . . are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism" (OPI, p. 12). Photography is the redeemer of realism and liberator of painting, not because it produces truer likenesses of the world, but because of the "psychological fact" that the process of photographic production gives a quality of realism to the resulting photograph that decisively satisfies our need for identity-substitutes.

Bazin's position here is complex and in need of careful analysis. Photographs definitively satisfy the deep psychological need for representations that preserve the being of their objects, and this constitutes a fact about human beings explained by our awareness of the process that produces photographs. That process of production gives "significant expression to the world both concretely and in its essence," thus satisfying the need for realistic reproduction in a form that achieves the aesthetic significance of true realism. The need is satisfied, therefore, because photographs are the product of a particular "mechanical" or "automatic" process whereby the world reproduces itself, thus escaping the subjective mediation inevitable with painting. "This production by automatic means," Bazin observes, "has radically affected our psychology of the image," which is to say our beliefs about, and attitudes toward, photography have been radically influenced by our awareness of this distinctively objective mode of picture making.[12] In what ways we will shortly discover, but this is the point at which we should turn to Currie and Carroll to see how the failure to take this psychological perspective of photography into account in interpreting Bazin's argument leads to a distortion of his views. We can complete the account of Bazin's argument in correcting these distortions.

## III

Gregory Currie's interpretation of Bazin is both cursory and dismissive, attributing to him a position that is patently absurd. Currie claims, first, that Bazin denies that photographs are representations, which raises the immediate question of what he imagines the nonrepresentational alternative to be. Currie's answer is that in contrast to representations, photographs are "presentations" of their objects. This constitutes Currie's second claim about Bazin's position, that he groups photographs together with lenses and other aids to vision as imagery that "present the world to us rather than representing it." Continuing this theme, Currie writes: "If we take Bazin at his literal word . . . a photograph of X is, or is part of, X . . . when we are in the presence of a photograph of X, we are in the presence of X."[13] Notice that the two claims Currie makes about Bazin's position are closely related. The first attributes to Bazin the denial that photographs are representations, and the second attributes to him a positive account of what they are in contrast to representations; if the first claim is false then so, too, is the second.

It is certainly true that Bazin distinguishes between two modes of representation, one of which might properly be called "presentational." But that does not imply a distinction between two kinds of things: representational picture and presentational reflection. To see where Currie's interpretation of Bazin goes wrong we need to start with this false distinction between the representational and the

presentational. Currie draws his distinction in terms of another between epistemic enhancement and visual access. He writes:

> Representations extend our epistemic access to things in the world; if they are reliable, representations give us information about things when those things are not readily accessible to us. And for some purposes a description, a detailed picture or some other kind of representation can be more informative than a direct perceptual examination of the thing itself . . . Other devices enhance our perceptual access to things themselves. Lenses help us see detail inaccessible to the naked eye. No one will say, I suppose, that lenses give us representations of things. They are, rather, aids to vision. They present the world rather than representing it.[14]

The problem is that the qualities that are supposed to distinguish presentations are precisely of the sort that are claimed to be distinctive of representations. Mirrors, photographs, and other lens imagery may indeed be used to enhance perceptual access to things and thus act as aids to vision. But these are qualities perfectly suited to extending "epistemic access" by providing information in just the way that is purportedly distinctive of representations. Indeed, although Bazin certainly thought there was a certain analogy between mirrors and photographs, he claims the latter are particularly valuable because they give us the world as we neither ordinarily experience it, nor could experience in any other way.[15] Photographs may constitute a representational kind distinct in important ways from other modes of iconic representation, but they are no less representations for that reason. And Bazin writes nothing to suggest he thinks otherwise.

Indeed, in OPI he explicitly refers to the objects and persons in photographs being "*représenté, effectivement re-présenté*."[16] In a later essay, however, there is a passage that at first glance might suggest Bazin has something like Currie's distinction in mind. He writes:

> Before the arrival of photography and later of cinema, the plastic arts . . . were the only intermediaries between actual physical presence and absence, their justification was their resemblance which stirs the imagination and helps the memory. But photography is altogether something other. Not at all the image of an object or being, but more exactly its trace. Its automatic genesis distinguishes it radically from the other techniques of reproduction. The photograph proceeds by means of the lens to the making of a veritable luminous impression in light—to a mould. As such it carries with it *more than mere resemblance*, namely a kind of identity.[17]

A superficial reading of this passage might suggest that Bazin is making a very sharp distinction between representations founded on resemblance and a nonrepresentational conception of photography as a tracing or mold of light. On closer inspection it is clear that Bazin thinks the invention of photography introduced a new kind of representation—an intermediary between the presence of an object to the senses and its complete absence. The invention of the mechanical process of photography introduced a kind of image that not only represents its object in the manner of ordinary representational resemblance, but also distinguishes itself from the usual forms of such picturing by being *in addition* a tracing of patterns of light reflected from its object. To put Bazin's point in terms he does not use, paintings represent iconically, but photographs are the coincidence of the representational categories of icon and index. Photographs are indexical in virtue of the causally generated mechanism of their production, but they are a special kind of index that points to its cause iconically, or by picturing that cause. There are, then, two modes of representation, the iconic and the iconically indexical, and there is not, as Currie suggests, a distinction between representation and a different category of thing.

If Currie is mistaken in supposing that Bazin believes photographs do not represent, then he must likewise be mistaken in the positive account of the alternative to representation he attributes to Bazin. At the very least, his failure to see that Bazin is describing a mode of representation leads Currie to misunderstand Bazin's claim that a photograph and its object share "a kind of identity." According to Currie, Bazin's identity thesis should be understood in its literal sense to be claiming that a photograph "is, or is part of" the object causally responsible for its creation. For nothing less would be consistent with the view that photographs do not represent. Literally, a photograph and the object it

presents are in some sense or other the same thing, or at least the material convergence of sign and signified. This view is so strange and implausible that it is difficult to imagine anyone seriously holding it—but particularly Bazin, who observes that "[n]o one believes any longer in the ontological identity of model and image" (OPI, p. 10).

There is, however, another passage that might be thought to support Currie's reading of Bazin. Hugh Gray, Bazin's translator, renders it thus: "The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it . . . it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model" (OPI, p. 14). This often quoted passage is one of Hugh Gray's more misleading translations of Bazin's text.[18] The immediate context of the passage is Bazin's discussion of the difference between painting and photography as modes of representation, with this discussion being itself part of his exploration of how the automatic process of photography has "radically affected our psychology of the image." After observing that painting is an "inferior technique" for reproducing appearances, the passage that Grey mistranslates occurs. Here is a more literal rendering of Bazin's words.

> The lens alone gives us an image of the object capable of bringing back to consciousness our deep unconscious need for a substitute for an object that is more than an approximate transfer: namely, the object itself, but freed from the contingencies of time . . . the image acts upon us through its origin in the being of the model; it is the model.[19]

Gray's translation has Bazin making a claim about the substantial nature of the photographic image, whereas the original text indicates that in fact he is observing one of the psychological effects of the photographic mode of representation. In particular, that photographs remind us of our deep primordial need for a representational preservation of objects and persons from the influence of time. Why this happens is explained in part by our awareness of how photographs are related to reality in the process of their production, and in part by the nature of the need. The need is to preserve the object itself from time, but this is a difficult need to satisfy if the only means of doing so are representational identity substitutes. The subjectively mediated and approximate representation of the appearance of the world that painting provides was only satisfying before the invention of photography provided an alternative mode of representation in which the relation between image and object is more direct and intimate. Photographs approach closer to the psychological ideal of the identity of image and object because they are made by a process in which patterns of light reflected from an object are encoded and reproduced without the intervening involvement of mankind. This photochemical connection between image and object both reminds us of, and more adequately satisfies, our need for identity-substitutes.

Bazin characterizes the direct and intimate relation between a photograph and its object as the sharing of "a common being" and "a kind of identity." We should remember that within the psychological perspective in which this identity thesis is formulated, these are characterizations of responsive attitudes to a kind of picture produced as photographs are through the mechanical encoding of patterns of reflected light. Our awareness of this process leads to a certain conception being formed of a closer connection between image and object, but the beliefs and attitudes that constitute this conception are also conditioned by the need for imagery that satisfies a deep desire for identity-substitutes. Bazin's identity thesis is therefore both psychologically and phenomenologically oriented. Phenomenologically in the sense that the identity thesis characterizes how photographs present themselves to consciousness and the meaning we project onto them. Psychologically in that this projected meaning is itself conditioned by the deep need for identity-substitutes that preserve their objects from the effects of time. Indeed, if one subtracts from Bazin's account of his identity thesis its broadly psychological dimensions, all that is left is a material description of the photochemical process by which photographs are made. But Bazin is clear that his identity thesis involves a conception of photography in part informed by our awareness of this process, but not reducible to either that awareness or the material process. It should be emphasized,

however, that it is the photochemical process alone that produces the beliefs and attitudes characterizing the identity thesis. So Bazin remarks: "The image may be blurred, distorted, discoloured and without documentary value, but still it acts upon us through its origin in the being of the model."[20] The process by which they are made, and not the resulting appearance of photographs, is the important factor in determining the medium's psychological effect.

An important feature of the psychological character of Bazin's identity thesis is revealed by the analogy he draws between the kind of identity that relates the photograph and its object, and the kind of identity relating a fingerprint to its unique cause. Bazin does not expand on the analogy, but it is worth reflecting upon. The context of its introduction is another of the contrasts he draws between painting and photography. The frame of the painting encloses a world mediated by the mind, and therefore "a substantially and essentially different microcosm." The photograph and its object, by contrast, "share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint" (OPI, p. 15). If a fingerprint shares a common being with its unique cause, and does so because the manner of this cause is the imprinting of flesh to surface analogous to the imprinting of an object onto film by means of reflected light, then the shared being must have a psychological character. For taken by itself, the process of imprinting that creates the fingerprint and photograph is one in which the world causes these representational signs. If this were all Bazin's identity thesis amounted to, then it would be extravagant to call it an identity thesis at all. In fact, the heart of the identity thesis is the description of the psychological response to indexical signs produced in the manner of an impression of object to surface. Without confusing cause and effect, we treat photography as if it shared a common being with its cause: conceiving of, responding to, and describing the photograph as if it were its cause. This is not an illusion, but an intentional attitude conditioning our experience of photographs and providing a context in which the claim that, for example, "the image is the object" has its significance. Needless to say, this position is far removed from the material identity thesis that Currie attributes to Bazin.

IV

Noël Carroll presents a much fuller analysis of Bazin's argument in OPI than Currie, but although it displays a better understanding of some features of Bazin's position, his interpretation is similarly flawed by his failure to take note of the psychological orientation of the argument. Carroll's failure in this regard is quite striking because he is alive to the importance in general of a psychological dimension to the explanation of representation. Yet he faults Bazin for defending a theory of photographic representation that, Carroll tells us, "proposes itself as a physical analysis without psychological dimensions."[21] Having overlooked the psychological orientation of OPI, Carroll's understanding of Bazin's position is unsurprisingly mistaken.

Unlike Currie, Carroll does not doubt that Bazin is defending a theory of photographic representation. Indeed, he takes Bazin to be defending a version of the copy theory of representation formulated to avoid the powerful objections to the standard formulation of such theories in terms of resemblance. According to the standard view, a picture represents its object in virtue of visually resembling it. One of the problems with such crude resemblance theories, and Carroll's interpretation of Bazin's response to it, is neatly summarized by Carroll thus:

> For Bazin, a film has existential import. It is a re-presentation of something that existed in the past. Here the problem of establishing how something two-dimensional can resemble something three-dimensional is putatively bypassed with the assertion of perceptual identity. The film image *is* the model (That is, is perceptually identical to the model.)[22]

One part of this claim is misleading and another is simply a false account of Bazin's position. Carroll's understanding of Bazin's identity thesis being formulated in sharp contrast to resemblance theories is misleading. Bazin does not exclude the notion of resemblance from his account of photographic representation, but instead denies that this feature has any role in bringing about the psychological effects of this mode of picturing. Indeed, in Bazin's story of the evolution of the plastic arts, painting is freed from its "resemblance complex" by photography,

to which it abandons the aim of reproducing similar appearances. Painting gives up on the resemblances, or naturalistic figuration, but not because photography achieves greater verisimilitude of appearance. Indeed, as Bazin notes: "Photography will long remain the inferior of painting in the reproduction of colour" (OPI, p. 12). Rather, photography becomes forever the medium of pictorial resemblances because of the way that resemblance is produced by the photographic process and the psychological effects of such a mode of picture making. Bazin's account of photographic representation is therefore focused on how a certain class of resembling imagery has a more intimate connection with the objects it depicts than do other kinds of pictures because of the process that produces them. In itself it is hardly a significant misreading of Bazin to suppose instead that he formulates his theory of representation in contrast to resemblance theories. However, that misreading leads Carroll to a significant misunderstanding of Bazin's identity thesis. The connection arises because the only interpretation of the relation between photographs and their objects that sharply contrasts with perceptual similarity is perceptual identity—which is exactly the view Carroll wrongly attributes to Bazin.

It should be noted that the notion of "perceptual identity" could be interpreted in a number of ways. Some of these will be returned to, but given that Bazin does not employ perceptual concepts in his argument, the range of options for understanding perceptual identity with any foundation in Bazin's text are extremely limited. Carroll's interpretation takes its inspiration from the metaphor of the mold that, as we have seen in the passage quoted earlier, Bazin employs to characterize photographs—writing that they are "the taking of a luminous impression . . . to a mould," and therefore "more than a mere resemblance, namely a kind of identity." Carroll is right to identify this passage as important for understanding Bazin's identity thesis, and the analysis he gives of the metaphor of the mold is in large part accurate. Because, however, Carroll is looking for a notion of perceptual identity, and is not aware of the psychological orientation of Bazin's argument, he draws an incorrect conclusion regarding the identity thesis from the mold metaphor. We can see Carroll making this mistake when he writes of that metaphor:

> I take it that it must refer to the raw film stock. The metaphor of film stock as mould, it seems to me, specifies the way Bazin construes the identity relation between the model and the developed film image. That is, the mould "fits" both the image and the model . . . One way of unpacking this . . . is that Bazin's identity claim holds that patterns of light from the image are identical with pertinent patterns of light from the model, which also served as causal factors in the production of the image.[23]

Carroll is certainly right that Bazin considers patterns of reflected light focused through the lens as the impressing force on the film mold, from which castings can eventually be taken in the form of prints. However, in Carroll's "unpacking" of this metaphor of the mold we find him led into error by his failure to take notice of the psychological orientation of Bazin's argument.

Carroll's understanding of Bazin's identity thesis supposes this relation holds between the patterns of light reflected from a photograph and those reflected from the object constituting the imprinting force that created the photograph. Interpreting Bazin's identity thesis in this way is no doubt why Carroll believes Bazin's theory of photographic representation is "a physical analysis without psychological dimensions." But insofar as Carroll supposes the identity between image and object Bazin proposes is to be found at the material level of patterns of reflected light, his characterization of the identity as perceptual is puzzling. At the same time, insofar as Carroll takes the identity to be perceptual, he introduces a psychological dimension to his reading of Bazin's argument. In fact, there is little in Carroll's argument to explain his characterization of the identity as perceptual, given that he consistently gives a material account of the identity relation. Thus, at one point, he writes in criticism of Bazin that "it is not enough to show that the image and a model deliver identical patterns of light to a station point."[24] The fact that identical patterns of light are reflected to an abstracted light-sensitive "station point" is the full extent of the perceptual character of the identity thesis Carroll attributes to Bazin. This is hardly a distinctively

perceptual conception of identity. What would constitute a distinctively perceptual reconstruction of Bazin's identity thesis is worth exploring, but first it must be emphasized that Carroll's error is not primarily the characterization of the identity thesis as perceptual, but rather his direct association of that thesis with the underlying photochemical process of photography. As we have seen, this process is part of the cause of the psychological response to photographs in terms of which Bazin formulates his identity thesis. The patterns of light reflected by a photograph and its object are not identical, but even if they were, it would still be a mistake to suppose this material identity has any greater significance in Bazin's theory than as the material cause of a psychological effect.

It is worth briefly considering how Bazin's identity thesis might be reconstructed in terms of the notion of "perceptual identity." Although Carroll gives little clue as to what he understands by perceptual identity, there are several ways of interpreting the notion. One rather extravagant way would have it that the perceptual experience of looking at an object photographically represented is identical to the perceptual experience of looking directly at the object. However, there are far too many differences between looking at objects in photographs and seeing those objects directly to take this interpretation seriously.[25] A more moderate interpretation of perceptual identity would claim that, notwithstanding the many differences just alluded to, it is nevertheless the case that in looking at a photograph one is in genuine perceptual contact with the object causally related to the photograph. According to this view, an object represented photographically is literally seen by means of, or through, the photograph, and this perceptual relationship is identical in kind, if not phenomenally, to seeing the object directly. This position on photographic representation is neither Bazin's nor Carroll's, being instead influentially championed by Kendall Walton.[26] It is worth noting that Walton's position, if not his argument, shows the influence of Bazin, appearing to be a reconstruction in perceptual terms of Bazinian realism. However odd the position may initially appear, Walton's argument is both subtle and compelling, with its soundness dependent on complex issues in the philosophy of perception.[27]

A third and final interpretation of the notion of perceptual identity understands this relation psychologically, as a response to photographs with its origin in the imagination, whereby they are treated in some respects as if they enable us to see the objects they represent. This reconstructed position is consistent with Bazin's account of the automatic production of photographs to a mold by the impression of patterns of reflected light. The awareness of such a material characterization of the process of production might be sufficient to explain why we treat photographs as if they made the object perceptually present for us. But a better explanation of our psychological responses to photographic representation would combine awareness of the process of their production with the effect of their optical appearance and its relation to perceptual appearances.

Needless to say, this is not the position Carroll attributes Bazin. Nor, however, is it Bazin's position—not least because Bazin does not conceive of his identity thesis in perceptual terms, and the reliance on how photographs look to explain their realism is thoroughly un-Bazinian. Because he formulates the identity thesis from a broadly psychological perspective, Bazin does not need to invoke specifically perceptual concepts in his explanation of photographic realism. Instead, he employs the psychologically-oriented notion of presence, which can be supposed to have a perceptual dimension without that being sufficient for its explanation. Moreover, to isolate the perceptual aspect of the psychology of the photographic image from the other beliefs and attitudes that constitute the data from which the ontology of the photographic image is drawn can only ultimately distort Bazin's meaning.

## v

When Bazin's position is recovered from the kind of misinterpretations we have been considering, we are in a better position to consider it critically and reach a fair estimation of its worth. Rather than do this with any depth, I will close with a few very general comments.

The argument of OPI has some features worthy of retention and others that are more doubtful. His view that human beings have a deep and

primordial psychological need to find substitutes for real things that can be presented to consciousness as preserving them in some form is certainly a doubtful hypothesis. It is not that the psychological need is doubtful, since the existence of magic identity-substitutes in the past and the lingering symbolic remains of such attitudes suggest such a need can be identified. Rather, what is doubtful is the role that Bazin gives to this need in determining the psychological effects of the photographic image. The existence of such a deep need for identity-substitutes and the desire to embalm objects from the effects of time are unnecessary features of Bazin's psychology of the photographic image. On the other hand his characterization of the automatic process of photography as the making of a picture to a mold, together with the psychological examination of the effects of this mode of representation, remain valuable clues to understanding photographic realism.

Whether Bazin is right to wholly exclude the distinctive appearance of photographs from the explanation of their psychological effect is another questionable feature of his argument. The issues here are large and complex, but at root the question is whether there is any sense to the claim that photographs reproduce the appearance of things in a manner sufficiently similar to their appearance in perceptual experience to justify that feature of the medium having a role in bringing about the psychological effect Bazin describes. What can be said with confidence is that this effect cannot be explained in terms of such a similarity of appearances alone. It is, as Bazin emphasizes, awareness of the causal origins of photographic representation in reflected light that first and foremost informs our sense of photographic realism. Nevertheless, there is a pressing issue here in relation to Bazin's argument, not least because he relies on such a notion of perceptual resemblance when drawing his conclusions about the aesthetic qualities of photography. He writes, for example, that "[t]he categories of resemblance distinctive of the photographic image also determine its aesthetic character in contrast to that of painting. The aesthetic qualities of photography reside in its revelation of the real."[28] At the level of aesthetic value at least, the appearance of the world in photographs, and not just knowledge of how photographs are made, constitutes an important part of Bazin's realism. This is perhaps unsurprising, but it suggests there is room for doubting his claim that the appearance of the world in photographs plays no part in the explanation of the distinctiveness of photographic representation or its powerful psychological effects. If significantly blurred or distorted photographs have no aesthetic effect because they prevent reality revealing itself to us, why should they have any psychological effect either? How could a viewer be supposed to treat such a photograph as if it shared its being with the unidentifiable object of which it is a trace? This is perhaps a point at which the postulated psychological need to preserve being against the effects of time holds too great a sway over Bazin's thought.

There are two further worries about Bazin's position that deserve to be briefly indicated, both of which arise from the sense that he is attributing to all photographs what is true of only some. First, Bazin's claim about where the aesthetic qualities of photography are located, as well as the normative implication that photographers should respect the realism constituting the specific nature of their medium, is highly doubtful. Why Bazin holds this anachronistic view circumscribing the possibilities for an aesthetically significant photographic art is a complex matter, better left to another occasion.[29] The importance of the point, in this context, is that Bazin ought to have recognized the limited explanatory scope of his argument to what is sometimes called "straight photography." Second, it is doubtful that the experience Bazin describes of spectators identifying the image and its object is the only kind of experience we have of photographs, rather than just one of many possible psychologically informed responses. Roland Barthes's descriptions of looking at photographs very often exemplify a Bazinian psychology of the photographic image, such as the following remark from the beginning of *Camera Lucida*: "One day quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: 'I am looking at eyes that looked at the emperor.' "[30] It is highly doubtful that this is the only, or even a typical, experience we have when looking at

photographs. Nevertheless, it is one important sort of experience of photographs, and Bazin more than anyone else saw its significance and helped us to understand it.

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1. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Harvard University Press, 1979); Rudolf Arnheim, "On the Nature of Photography," *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1974): 149–161; Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondworth: Penguin Books, 2002); Kendall Walton, "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 246–277; Patrick Maynard, "The Secular Icon: Photography and the Functions of Images," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42 (1983): 155–170; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections upon Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Flamingo, 1984); and Ted Cohen, "What's Special about Photography," *Monist* 71 (1988): 292–305.

2. André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (University of California Press, 1971). David Brubaker's "André Bazin on Automatically Made Images," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 59–67, is an exceptional instance of a careful study of an aspect of Bazin's argument.

3. Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Noël Carroll, *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton University Press, 1988).

4. See Dudley Andrew, *André Bazin* (Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 70.

5. Hazel Barnes, "Sartre's Ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. Christina Howells (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 25.

6. On several occasions in this paper I have altered Gray's translation of Bazin's text to bring it closer to the French original. For the failings of Gray's translation, see note 18 below. When substantial alterations are made to Gray's translation, the French original is also provided. For the text just cited, the original text reads: "Une psychanalyse des arts plastiques pourrait considèrer la pratique de l'embaumement comme un fait fondamental de leur genèse . . . La religion égyptienne dirigée tout entière contre la mort, faisait dépendre la survie de la pérennité matérielle du corps. Elle satisfaisait par là à un besoin fondamental de la psychologie humaine: la défense contre le temps. La mort n'est que la victoire du temps. Fixer artificiellement les apparences charnelles de l'être c'est l'arracher au fleuve de la durée." André Bazin, "Ontologie de L'Image Photographique," in *Qu'est ce Que le Cinéma*? (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1994), p. 9. Hereafter, the French text of OPI will be distinguished by the designation OPI-f.

7. "Ainsi se révèle, dans les origines religieuses de la statuaire, sa fonction primordiale: sauver l'être par l'apparence" (OPI-f, p. 9).

8. Andrew, *André Bazin*, p. 68. Bazin would have encountered Malraux's thought about cinema in "Esquisse d'un Psychologie du Cinéma," Verve 5(2) (1940), translated as "Sketch for a Psychology of the Moving Pictures" and collected in Reflections on Art, ed. Susanne K. Langer (Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), pp. 317–327.

9. Finally, art enters an era of decadence in which the plastic arts seek to satisfy the need to cheat death, but through a representational art concerned with an ideal of adorned reality, a substitute world temporally independent from this one. See André Malraux, "Museum Without Walls," trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949).

10. "Si l'histoire des arts plastiques n'est pas seulement celle de leur esthétique mais d'abord de leur psychologie, elle est essentiellement celle de la ressemblance ou, si l'on veut, du réalisme" (OPI-f, p. 10).

11. "Désormais la peinture fut écartelée entre deux aspirations: l'une proprement esthétique—l'expression des réalitiés spirituelles où le modèle se trouve transcendé par le symbolisme des formes—l'autre qui n'est qu'un désir tout psychologique de remplacer le monde extérieur par son double" (OPI–f, p. 11).

12. The passage continues: "The objectivity of photography confers on it a powerful credibility wholly absent from other pictures. Whatever the objections of our critical spirit, we are compelled to believe in the existence of the object represented" (OPI, p. 11). "L'objectivité de la photographie lui confère une puissance de crédibilité absente de toute œuvre picturale. Quelles que soient les objections de notre esprit critique nous sommes obligés de croire à l'existence de l'objet représenté" (OPI-f, p. 13).

13. Currie, *Image and Mind*, p. 51.

14. Currie, *Image and Mind*, pp. 49–50.

15. Bazin, "Theatre and Cinema, Part 2," in *What is Cinema*, p. 97.

16. Bazin, OPI-f, p. 13

17. Bazin, "Theatre and Cinema, Part Two" in *What is Cinema*, vol. 1 (University of California Press, 1971), p. 96, emphasis added. The original reads: "Jusqa'à l'apparition de la photographie puis du cinéma, les arts plastiques, surtout dans le portrait, étaient les seuls intermédiaires possibles entre la présence concrète et l'absence. La justification en était la ressemblance, qui excite l'imagination et aide la mémoire. Mais la photographie est tout autre chose. Non point l'image d'un objet ou d'un être, mais bien plus exactement sa trace. Sa genèse automatique la distingue radicalement des autres techniques de reproduction. Le photographe procède, par l'intermédiaire de l'objectif, à une véritable prise d'empreinte lumineuse: à un moulage. Comme tel, il emporte avec lui plus que la ressemblance, une sorte d'identité." Bazin, "Théatre et Cinéma 11" in *Qu'est ce Que le Cinéma*? (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1994), p. 96.

18. The failings of Gray's translation have been extensively noted. See, for example, Brubaker, "André Bazin on Automatically Made Images," p. 66, n. 4; and Richard Roud, "André Bazin: His Fall and Rise," *Sight and Sound* 37 (1968): 94–96.

19. "L'objectif seul nous donne de l'objet une image capable de 'défouler,' du fond de notre inconscient, ce

besoin de substituer à l'objet mieux qu'un décalque approximatif: cet objet lui-même, mais libéré des contingences temporelles" (OPI-f, p. 14).

20. "L'image peut être floue, déformée, décolorée, sans valeur documentaire, elle procède par sa genèse de l'ontologie du modèle; elle est le modéle" (OPI-f, p. 14).

21. Carroll, *Philosophical Problems*, p. 132.

22. Carroll, *Philosophical Problems*, p. 127.

23. Carroll, *Philosophical Problems*, p. 126. Carroll acknowledges that his interpretation attributes to Bazin a position that is never explicitly stated in OPI.

24. Carroll, *Philosophical Problems*, p.133.

25. See Richard Gregory, *Eye and Brain* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966); and J. Snyder and N. Allen, "Photography, Vision, and Representation," *Critical Inquiry* 2 (1975): 143–169.

26. Kendall Walton, "Transparent Pictures."

27. See Jonathan Friday, *Aesthetics and Photography* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Press), 2002.

28. "Les catégories de la ressemblance qui spécifient l'image photographique, déterminent donc aussi son esthétique par rapport à la peinture. Les virtualités esthétiques de la photographie résident dans la révélation du réel" (OPI-f, p. 16).

29. Noël Carroll argues in *Philosophical Problems*, pp. 135ff., that the normative dimension of Bazin's realism is built on the mistaken belief that a supposed essence of a medium determines its specific nature, determining how it can and cannot be used to make art. There is certainly some truth in this diagnosis, but it is far from the whole story. The nature of Bazin's normative conclusions about photographic art are conditioned by his views on the significance of the appearance of photography in the unfolding of art history, and by his belief in the power of photography to redeem reality from the "piled up preconceptions" that he believes alienate us from the world we inhabit.

30. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 3.

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